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THE WARRIOR

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RODEO 2005 Warriors of the North lauded at competition

By Airman 1st Class Patrice Clarke
Public affairs

"I expect the competition to be intense, the requirements demanding and the rewards great. In the words of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, 'On the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that on other fields and other days will bear the fruits of victory.' I look forward to another safe and outstanding Rodeo," -- **Gen. John Handy, Commander Air Mobility Command.**

After months of practice, Grand Forks Air Force Base's team walked away from AMC's 2005 Rodeo competition with "Best KC-135 Air Refueling Crew" and "Best Air Refueling Team" trophies.

The Air Mobility Rodeo, sponsored by AMC and held at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., June 19-24 is the signature readiness competition of mobility air forces. Rodeo showcases competitions in airdrop, air refueling, aeromedical evacuation, security forces operations, short field landings and related ground operations. It also provides an opportunity for the world's best aerial refuelers and airlifters to demonstrate their capabilities, learn how to improve procedures, com-

pare notes and enhance standardization for worldwide operations.

During the event, General Handy encouraged teams to compete hard, play hard, enjoy themselves, but most importantly, fly safe. He emphasized that each and every one of the competitors were winners and their experiences at Rodeo would serve them well in the future.

"We're here to learn, make new friends and have some competition," said Brig. Gen. Scott Gray, 2005 Rodeo commander.

From the beginning, the Grand Forks team knew they were up against some tough competitors and had to bring their best game.

"General Gray and a number of colonels were all lined up at attention when we pulled into our parking spot on the McChord AFB ramp," said Capt. Brian Mackey, team captain. As we passed them they saluted us. When the general salutes you, you know the fight is on."

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Base gets taste of large-scale deployment



Photo by Senior Airman James Croxon

Col. Bill Bender, Grand Forks Air Force Base commander (wearing flight suit), waits with other Warriors of the North as they listen to a pre-deployment briefing during a recent base exercise. The exercise tested the ability to process Airmen and cargo for a mass deployment.

By Senior Airman James Croxon
Public affairs

Hundreds of Grand Forks Air Force Base Airmen packed their bags for a deployment July 19 and 20.

Their destination: nowhere.

The base's individual readiness exercise tested the personnel mobility and logistical processing capabilities of the 319th Air Refueling wing and demonstrated the high points of the its deployment process - as well as areas needing attention.

One such highlight was the processing of several hundred Airmen for a mock deployment, making sure they rapidly got the information and equipment they needed.

"After today, I feel like I could deploy immediately," said Airman Kevin Westlund, a survival equipment specialist with the 319th Maintenance Squadron. "From the issued equipment to the informative briefings, I feel prepared."

However, it wasn't just Airmen who haven't deployed before who expressed confidence in the processing line.

"Coming from a flight crew background, deploying in this manner is all quite new to me," said Chief Master Sgt. Harry Viel, wing command chief master sergeant. Flight crews typically deploy together rather than as part of a larger group.

"The information in the briefings was to the point and comprehensive. From wills to powers of attor-

ney to religious counseling, the processing line gives Airmen a chance to get everything they might not have thought about before they deploy. It's great to see."

For Airmen who usually get processed individually, the exercise gave them a chance to experience a large-scale unit deployment.

"I have always deployed individually or in a small group," said Staff Sgt. Rutorrestt Larse of the 319th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron and a veteran of several overseas deployments.

"It's great to see what it's like to deploy with a unit. It makes me want to do it this way next time."

Another demanding part of the exercise was the fact that more than 40 Airmen processed in each group - or chalk - nearly twice as many as normal.

Deployment veterans like 1st Lt. James Wall, officer in charge of the 319th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron specialist element, assured Airmen who had never deployed before that the process can be even more intense and fast-paced in real-world deployments.

According to wing leaders, the exercise was just the first in many future such events for the base.

"This starts our 'drum up' for an increased focus and tempo to the exercise program," said Col. Bill Bender, 319th Air Refueling Wing commander.

"It is our 'go to war' exercise; it's what we're going to be doing for the next year as we see an increased tempo in our exercise program."

Celebrating birthday Warrior way

By Master Sgt. Rich Romero
40th Air Expeditionary Group Public Affairs

A Warrior of the North celebrated his 21st birthday in a memorable way late July by offloading 85,200 pounds of jet fuel at 27,500 feet to a B-52 bound for Afghanistan.

It was merely another day at the office for Airman 1st Class Robert Willis a deployed 905th Air Refueling Squadron boom operator.

"It's our job to get the gas to them where and when they need it," said Airman Willis.

He and a mixture of Airmen from three stateside bases make up the 28th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron. Currently, aircrews, staff officers and maintainers from Grand Forks Air Force Base, MacDill AFB, Fla., and Robins AFB, Ga. form the squadron.

Because of the high operations tempo the tanker community experiences, they don't fit into the same rotation schedule as Airmen on a typical 120-day Air Expeditionary Force deployment. Demand is high on the dual-role KC-135s which can carry up to 83,000 pounds of cargo and 37 passengers.

"While we support the AEF just like other major weapon systems, there simply aren't enough tankers available for them to fit neatly into the [120-day] AEF cycle," said Lt. Col. Jeffrey Sheppard, 28th EARS commander, and the wing's deployed operations support squadron commander. "Many (Airmen) from the KC-135 community would welcome the opportunity to deploy for 120 days and then spend several months at home, but that's just not possible in today's environment.

"We're in demand 365 days a year both at home and in a myriad of deployed locations. The only way to handle that demand is to have all the wings continuously share in the deployment burden."

Crew No. 5, who drew the 7 a.m. sortie July 22, can certainly attest to that. Deployed 905th ARS members Capts. Ryan Budinko, aircraft commander, and David Eisenbrey, pilot, have both been deployed for 180 days in the past year.

Airman Willis has deployed for nearly 250 days. Typically, tanker aircrew deployments are for 60 days at a time.

"The tanker community deploys a lot," Colonel Sheppard said. "While some tanker troops might spend a shorter time at a given location relative to someone in a straight AEF tasking, that person may deploy repeatedly throughout the year, so overall days remain quite high."

Captain Budinko and Airman Willis are perfect examples of this. They have deployed together during three consecutive deployments. However, both agree there are benefits as a result.

"You certainly build a rapport and trust with that person," said Airman Willis, who has nearly 800 flying hours in his 18 months in the Air Force. "It's hard to trust people who you don't know well, particularly when your life is in each other's hands."

Captain Budinko said it's one of the biggest benefits was knowing instantly how the other person is feeling.

"From the first interaction with him, I can tell how he's doing," said the native of Glendora, Calif. "I also know a lot about him personally, including his family."

However, the Grand Forks crew doesn't typically fly together at home station.

"At home station, we don't have dedicated crews," said Airman Willis. "We fly with different people much of the time. When deployed, though, we typically fly with the same crew each time."

While the KC-135 has a dual-role capability, the nearly 10 aircrews here solely provide air refueling support, primarily for bombers heading into and out of Afghanistan. It's arguably as important a mission as the aircraft they refuel.

"Operation Enduring Freedom basically runs on tankers," said Captain Eisenbrey, who has more than 2,400 flying hours.

For Airman Willis, it's a mission that's immensely satisfying.

"They (aircraft) don't stay in the air without you," said the Houston native. "You feel really needed

(when deployed) because you're directly supporting the mission." There's not necessarily a lot of time spent back home, though. While many of the tanker support troops are here for 120 days, Air Mobility Command policy also gives units the option of swapping out their people mid-tour, which gives them added flexibility, Colonel Sheppard said.

"For example, I have an assistant operations officer on staff who arrived here mid-tour, shortly after completing a deployment to another location," he said. "He took the place of an officer who was here and went home just in time to go TDY to instructor school and then PCS. Without the option of a mid-tour swap out, I wouldn't have been able to deploy either officer here."

Even with the high deployment rate and operations tempo, the crew feels the tanker community has a certain attitude of doing whatever is necessary to get the job done.

"Unlike other Air Mobility Command assets, we don't just land, spend 17 hours on the ground and take off," Captain Eisenbrey said. "The mission usually requires us to stick around for a little while if we go somewhere."

As far as crew No. 5 is concerned, they wouldn't



Photo by Staff Sgt. Jocelyn Rich

Can't be too prepared

Senior Airman William Paull, deployed from Grand Forks Air Force Base, plans a KC-135 refueling mission at an overseas location.

From being burned to burning rubber

By Airman 1st Class Patrice Clarke
Public affairs

Staff Sgt. Casey Ham, a boom operator with the 911th Air Refueling Squadron here, was ten minutes from boarding a plane to take some much-needed leave after a demanding overseas deployment just two days before Christmas when he got a phone call from his first sergeant.

Sergeant Ham's garage complex on base had caught on fire. His garage, along with three others, was ruined.

"I distinctly remember him telling me that everything in the garage was lost and my heart sank," said Sergeant Ham. No one was hurt in the fire but a couple of cars, a boat and Sergeant Ham's restored 1969 Chevy Chevelle were all in the ruined garage complex.

Sergeant Ham bought the car two years earlier as a fix-it-up project.

"I enjoyed the challenge," he said.

Although frequently deployed or on temporary duty assignments elsewhere, he still found time to work toward his dream of fully restoring the car.

"When I was home I would spend hours working on it," he said. "Sometimes until two or three in the morning."

That work paid off September 2003 when he finally got the car on the road, after putting more than \$4,000 in the car and countless hours into the project.

But he wasn't finished. After getting the car roadworthy, Sergeant Ham made sure it looked brand new.

"I sent it back to the body shop for new paint and worked on the interior and the carpets," he said.

When Sergeant Ham deployed last September he left the car carefully covered in the garage complex.

According to the base fire department, a spark started the fire in the four-plex garage unit early Dec. 22.

"We responded on scene and started to put the fire out when we were told that there was a restored car in the garage so we tried to do as much as possible to save it," said Roy Marshall, base fire fighter.

The fire fighters pumped water into the car garage and the surrounding housing units to douse the fire and prevent it from spreading. Unfortunately, the below-zero temperatures quickly froze all that.

"My neighbor called me and told me everything was lost," said Sergeant Ham. "I didn't believe him, but when my first shirt repeated the news, I was crushed."

Sergeant Ham delayed his flight and spent the next couple of hours trying to learn the status of his car.

"I finally called my buddy, Staff Sergeant Tom Shields, 319th Logistics Readiness Squadron, and asked him to check it out," he said.

"When I drove by," said Sergeant Shields, "I could see some color peaking out and the car cover looked intact. I called Casey back and told him the news. I could actually hear his relief through the phone."



Photos by Airman 1st Class Patrice Clarke

Sergeant Casey Hamsits in his newly restored 1969 Chevy Chevelle while members of the Grand Forks Air Force base fire department look on. Base firefighters helped save the car during a garage fire last winter.

After that call, Sergeant Ham finally boarded a flight and started his leave.

When the scene was clear, Sergeant Shields and a friend pushed the Chevelle out of the garage to prevent any more damage.

"We heated windshield deicer in the microwave and used it to get the tires out of the ice and open the door," said Sergeant Shields. "There was about a two inch thick coat of ice all over the car."

After returning from leave, Sergeant

Ham quickly assessed the damage and got right back to work fixing it. He had to get a new paint job and redo the interior of the trunk but little else was damaged.

His efforts were rewarded by a welcome sound.

"I had taken the battery out for the winter, but when I put the battery in and attempted to start it. It turned over on the first try.

"It was the best sound I've heard all year," he said.

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None of the team members, except Captain Mackey, had been to an AMC Rodeo before and at first they didn't know what to expect.

"We have a pretty young group and were graded by the most experienced people in the Air Force," said Captain Mackey. "It was a little intimidating."

"We quickly learned the difference between what the senior experts could look for and what they were actually looking for," added Master Sgt Steven Kerling, 319th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron.

According to many team members, there were a lot of long-term benefits from participation.

"You wouldn't believe the amount of experience everyone had. I learned a lot about even the smallest details of my job," said Airman 1st Class Jacob Wavrin, at 19 the youngest Airman on the Rodeo team.

Sergeant Kerling, the team's most experienced mentor, said that even he

learned a lot.

"Rodeo 2005 taught me a lot about building a productive team and preparing for and winning competition," said Sergeant Kerling.

"The preparation was hardest," he added. "You probably can't train enough for it. The daily training and physical fitness was grueling."

Fortunately, the hard work paid off for the team in the form of the two trophies and a lot of pride in accomplishment.

"We are tremendously proud of the men and women who represented us at Rodeo 2005," said Col. Bill Bender, 319th Air Refueling Wing commander. "The hours they spent training are a testament to the spirit of the Airmen they represented - all the Warriors of the North. The RODEO competition is all about teamwork and the awards won were well deserved."

"This competition represents the best of what the Air Force has to offer. Being a part of that distinguished group of winners has been a great experience," said Captain Mackey.